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ABSTRACT

Parents and professional educators agree that reading competence is a necessary prerequisite for successful achievement in nearly all other aspects of the elementary and secondary school curriculum. Successful school achievement is also seen as necessary for later occupational and economic achievement. It is commonly believed that reading failure is strongly related to difficulty in overall school adjustment and to social adjustment in the larger community. While this paper does not deal with all of these broad concerns, it focuses on some of the critical issues in reading achievement and suggests some possible areas in which further investigation might yield results that could be of direct benefit to educators who must plan and implement language programs for black children. It is clear that there is a need for well designed studies which are firmly based on systematic models of language acquisition. There is a need for carefully designed studies of the reading processes within the context of classroom situations where most instruction takes place. The most useful research will be that designed to help teachers utilize the most appropriate strategies in class rooms (or other learning environments) with children who are heterogeneous with regard to experience, motivation, and interest. (Author/JM)

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TEACHING BLACK CHILDREN TO READ: RESEARCH SUGGESTIONS

by

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U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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Reading failure is one of the most pressing concerns of American educators. When newspapers in large cities report the city-wide reading test results and indicate that local school averages are below national norms, there is a predictable public outcry followed by demands that the schools do something to improve the teaching of reading (Davis, 1972). Parents and professional educators agree that reading competence is a necessary prerequisite for successful achievement in nearly all other aspects of the elementary and secondary school curriculum. Successful school achievement is also seen as the necessary prerequisite to later occupational and economic achievement. Whether or not this faith in education as the road to social mobility is warranted, it is commonly believed that reading failure is strongly related to difficulty in overall school adjustment and to social adjustment in the larger community. While this paper cannot deal with all of these broad concerns, it will focus on some of the critical issues in reading achievement and suggest some possible areas in which further investigation might yield results that could be of direct benefit to educators who must plan and implement language programs for Black children.

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Research on Reading Retardation. A comprehensive review of research on reading retardation by Samuels (1973) concluded with the remark that despite "an impressive amount of research on the causes of reading retardation, the bulk of the research fails to add up to much". (p. 208) The following types of problems were cited:

a) The research has been piecemeal in its approach rather than systematic;

b) The matched-group designs generally used in these studies were inadequate;

c) The students were used for research after they were identified as having reading problems rather than before, thus masking what is cause and what is effect;

d) Numerous studies have investigated variables which are not components of a learning model of reading acquisition;

e) Diagnostic labels were used (dyslexia; learning disabilities) implying that causes of the reading problem were known;

f) Sources of unreliability in achievement-expectancy formulas, reading-achievement tests, and intelligence tests have resulted in invalid research results and conclusions.

What seems to be clear is that there is a need for well designed studies which are firmly based on systematic models of language acquisition. Whether the models are derived from psychological theories of learning or from sociolinguistic theories of language acquisition is less important than that the theories help to unravel the complex causal network involved in learning to read. Studies of the teaching of reading have too often been poorly designed and devoid of theoretical import. Many of the best designed studies of psychologists and linguists have focused on fragmentary details of

coding, decoding, visual and auditory discrimination, and the like which cannot easily be generalized to the complex task of reading. Thus, there is a need for carefully designed studies of the reading process within the context of classroom situations where most instruction takes place. While carefully controlled laboratory experiments may eventually lead to explanations of the details of the reading task, they will be of little use to the teacher who has to work in the typical urban classroom. The most useful research will be that designed to help teachers utilize the most appropriate strategies in classrooms (or other learning environments) with children who are heterogeneous with regard to experience, motivation, and interest.

Critical Issues in Reading. One of the important questions that has not been adequately studied is that of assessment. Much of the evidence supporting the widespread acceptance of the notion that Black children are poor readers is based on the results of reading readiness and reading achievement test scores. Reading tests include most of the biases of IQ tests and are, therefore, poor tools for determining the linguistic competence of Black children. Linguists such as Labov (1969) have shown us how inaccurate the concept of linguistic deprivation is when applied to urban Black children. Williams (1974) has provided an excellent discussion of the mismatch between test content and Black children's experiences and points out that ~~that~~ the school curriculum, including the reading curriculum, exhibits the same type of

mismatch. According to Williams, "The need is to develop educational models that plug into the Black child's linguistic, cognitive, and learning styles at the time of his initial exposure to formalized education in order to (1) capture his interest and (2) to maximize his opportunities for learning". (p. 19) The matching of educational content with the experiential background of the child will require the development of new instructional models as well as new assessment techniques.

In a provocative paper titled "Reading Failure and the Tests", Deborah Meier (1973) not only lists and discusses sources of bias in standardized reading tests, but also points out how testing programs harm children and discourage innovation and flexibility in school programs. She contends that individualized assessment, which can help a teacher to understand a child's own method of learning -- how he deals with the world, the strategies he employs, the tools he uses -- in the environment provided by the teacher- is far superior to the shallow unreliable evaluation provided by standardized paper-and-pencil group tests. There is, therefore, a need to develop various kinds of individual inventories, checklists or diagnostic instruments that can assist teachers in spotting or assessing a child's learning approach. Such instruments should be focused on what a child can do well, and where his interests and drives lie.

Another major area of concern involves appropriate strategies for teaching Black children to read. While there is no definitive research which clearly demonstrates the superiority or inferiority of any specific program or strategy, there are reports of "successful" programs in the literature. Often these reports fail to meet the standards of research design necessary for firm conclusions, and frequently they lead to conflicting conclusions. Nevertheless, it is instructive to look at a few of these reports. Rollins, et al. (1974) report that training teachers in contingency management techniques can be effective in restructuring the learning environments of inner-city children. They trained sixteen Black and white inner-city public school teachers to use positive behavior contingencies. The teachers used these techniques for one academic year with a total of 730 Black "disadvantaged" pupils from the first through eighth grades. Compared with matched control teachers and classes, these 16 teachers showed higher incidences of positive reinforcement and lower incidences of punishment. The experimental classes were less disruptive and more on task. They also gained more both in IQ and school achievement (including reading). The authors conclude that inner-city teachers can be trained to employ positive techniques of behavior management; they like and use such training; and public school pupils profit dramatically from restructuring their learning environment.

Stenner and Mueller (1973) report that the Child Parent Center Program in Chicago, a Title I, ESEA project, is "a successful compensatory education model." This six-year program, involving some 2,200 students ages 3 through 9 in 11 Child Parent Centers, has been successful in providing children with the skills needed for successful performance on standardized reading readiness and reading achievement tests. "The reading and math achievement test scores, like the readiness scores, are at or above national norms in almost every case." (p. 247) The authors attribute the success of the Centers to four characteristics: (1) early intervention (age 3); (2) heavy parent involvement; (3) program continuity; and (4) structured language/basic skills orientation. Program continuity seems to be the component that welds the other components into a successful strategy according to a later report (Chicago Board of Education, 1974). This latter report also indicates that the gains tend to slip when children enter regular fourth grade classes after graduating from the Child Parent Centers.

> The rate of growth for CPC graduates prior to entering the regular school program was one month growth for each month of instruction (National norm) but upon graduation and entry into the regular school program, the growth rate has slipped to 7 to 8 months growth for each year's instruction rather than the year for year rate during their CPC tenure. It is interesting to compare the regular school CPC graduates with the fourth grade cohort (N=39) who were graduated as a group to one classroom. Perhaps the continued peer pressure and high level of teacher expectation contributed to sustaining the month for month growth exhibited by the intact fourth grade cohort. However, this explanation is pure speculation and additional study is under way.

Evaluations of other programs such as Follow Through and Head Start also lend support to the results reported in Chicago. Programs which utilize early intervention, parent involvement, program continuity, and structured language/ basic skills materials appear to be more effective than programs that begin later in the child's life and/or use less structured materials and techniques where the evaluation criterion is standardized reading achievement test performance.

Perhaps the ultimate in structured approaches is the computerized reading program. Atkinson (1974) describes a Computer Assisted Instruction Program (CAI) in which the experimental children received CAI 15 minutes per day while control group children studied reading in the classroom during this period. He reports that: "For the population with which we have worked, the average reading level at the end of the third grade is approximately 2.9 when CAI, is not used. For students who receive CAI, the grade level is 4.1. (p. 177) He estimates that the program costs about $290.00 per pupil in addition to regular per pupil expenditures.

What we do not know about structured programs is whether or not children progress beyond minimal reading competence to the development of the ability and desire to use reading as a source of entertainment and as a source of information. We also know far too little about how such programs affect children's attitudes toward school and toward themselves. Critics argue that one unanticipated consequence of such programs is

likely to be the fostering of the following attitudes and beliefs:

1) that there is only one right answer;

2) that what is right and true cannot be arrived at by one's own thinking, observation or reasoning but only by what comes from outside -- from a textbook, teacher or some other authority;

3) that one's own feelings and ideas, given scant attention, are of little worth;

4) that to learn something is worthwhile only if it is tested or graded;

5) that to score well on tests is an important measure of self-worth and hence one's self-worth is in competition with the worth of one's peers. (deRivera, 1974)

Children need to develop the ability to use language to help them cope with their environment. It seems fairly clear that programs which stress structured language intervention operate on the assumption that the school's task is to help the child develop language skills that will enable him to function in the school setting and on tests that use school success as a criterion. We know very little about how the child incorporates this school language into his total language competence or how it influences his ability to cope outside of the school setting. We know even less about the "open education" programs which have the humanistic goal of helping each child to develop according to his own potential, utilizing his own unique learning style. I agree that standardized tests are inappropriate tools for evaluating such programs, but until adequate assessment tools are available their effectiveness for teaching Black children to read remains an open question that demands serious research efforts.

Considerable attention has been given to dialect influences on the reading achievement of Black children. Opinions on this question range from those who contend that Black English differs only minimally and superficially from American Standard English (and, therefore, causes few problems in learning to read), to those who believe that there are deep structural differences between the two language patterns and that structural interference between grammatical patterns may cause reading problems for many Black children. Linguists appear to accept as given that Black English speakers can express any and all ideas in their own language. Thus, there seems to be no reason to attribute cognitive limitations to speakers of Black English. Cazden (1972) states that differences between Black English and American Standard English are small in number and significance. "With the exception of a few features such as the special use of be, they are all matters of surface structure and affect meaning not at all."(p. 156) However, Stewart (1969) contends that wherever the structure of American Standard English differs from that of Black English, the "interference" of the familiar pattern in the production of the unfamiliar pattern may occur. He, therefore, recommends the use of classroom materials written in Black English as a means of avoiding "dialect interference" in the process of learning to read. He also suggests a gradual transition to textbook English after the child masters the initial reading skills.

Wolfram (1970) suggested four alternative approaches for te ching reading to Black English speakers: (1) design initial reading materials in Black English; (2) teach the child Standard English speech patterns before teaching reading; (3) retain the Standard English text, but let the child give his oral reading presentations in Black English; (4) since dialect differences are concentrated in only a few features, write books that avoid these features entirely. While none of these alternatives has been adequately studied, there seems to be agreement that Black parents, educators, and community leaders will strongly oppose efforts to introduce Black English materials into the public schools. Thus, this alternative does not seem practical except in alternative schools on an experimental basis. If adequate experience can be gained with this approach and adequate research designs can be implemented, it would be of considerable interest to know if use of such materials facilitates learning to read among Black English speakers.

Psychologists have investigated the effect of translating passages from a reading comprehension test into Black English. Marwit and Neumann (1974) report a study in which two Black and two white examiners administered standard English and nonstandard English forms of the Reading Comprehension section of the California Reading Test to 60 Black and 53 white second graders. Black subjects did not differ in their ability to comprehend the two forms of the test. Hall and Turner (1974), after reviewing the literature and evaluating the results of

their own research, concluded that it would serve no useful purpose to teach English as a second language to speakers of Black English if the goal is improved comprehension of Standard English. The one instance in this research which suggests that having Black English as a primary language may interfere with comprehension of Standard English involved a group of subjects who came from an almost totally segregated school. One implication that might be drawn is that degree of isolation from Standard English speakers may be a moderating variable in this type of study.

Labov and Robbins (1969) contend that the major problem responsible for reading failure is a cultural conflict. Their research provides fairly convincing evidence that for boys firmly grounded in street culture, teachers and school values have little relevance. Teachers in urban schools have little ability to reward or punish members of the street culture, or to motivate learning by any means. While this problem may be less acute in the early grades, it seems reasonably certain that from fourth grade on the competing rewards of the street may overshadow anything in the school environment. These authors suggest that it may be necessary to use non-college trained adolescents to reach and motivate these children. Some evidence does exist that supports the potential value of using adolescents to tutor younger boys. (Lane, et al., 1972) Additional research on the effectiveness of using pupils to tutor other pupils (including peer tutors) would be extremely useful.

An equally important form of cultural conflict is exhibited in teacher attitudes toward Black English. There is considerable evidence available on this subject. However, the problem is deeper than a simple bias against nonstandard language forms. The language bias is often a racial bias as well. One of the best examples of this bias was reported by Crowl and MacGinitie (1974). In this study tape recordings were made of six white and six Black ninth-grade boys speaking identically worded answers to typical school questions. Significantly higher grades were assigned by 62 experienced white teachers to the recorded answers when spoken by whites than when spoken by Black students. This study illustrates the fallacy in the belief that it is only the grammar and sentence structure errors of Black students which cause teachers to give them lower grades than whites. There is also evidence that the race of the teacher affects Black students' test performance in some situations (reviewed in Epps, 1974). A recent study by Rystrom and Cowart (1972) found that Black students tested by a white teacher recognized fewer words correctly than did Black pupils tested by a Black tester. Results in this area have not been altogether consistent. Therefore, additional research is needed to clarify conditions in which the race of the teacher may impair or enhance reading performance.

The effects of the use of Black Studies materials in the classroom is another area which could provide useful information. A study by Grant (1973) used a total of 438 third-grade pupils and 560 sixth-grade pupils in an investigation

of the effects of the SRA We Are Black laboratory materials upon the self-concept, achievement, and school attendance of Black children. Results suggested positive statistically significant (.05) differences in the reading (Metropolitan Achievement Test) achievement and attendance of children who used the SRA material when compared to a control group. It is especially important to note that the subject content of the material may be more important than the language style in which it is written for purposes of motivating children to become proficient readers. This is still an open question, but certainly one which warrants research.

Concluding Note. We must avoid the temptation to look at reading as an isolated skill. We must also avoid the fallacy of looking at schools in isolation from the communities of which they are a part. A part of our difficulty in determining the relative effectiveness of various approaches to education in the Black community, as in other minority communities, stems from the very real conflicts in values and goals that inevitably exist in any heterogeneous group. Many educational planners approach reading as if there is a homogeneous entity called the Black community. It should not be necessary to remind educators and social scientists that Blacks in America range from rich to poor, urban to rural, well-educated to illiterate, and from separatist to integrationist. Policy-makers must take this diversity into consideration as they evaluate strategies to bring to an end the mis-education of Black Americans.

I will conclude on a pessimistic note. The institutions of the society are designed to maintain established patterns of dominance and subordination among competing groups. Since the schools mirror the total society, we might ask if it is reasonable to expect them to eliminate racial and ethnic inequality in America. Diana Slaughter (1974) has developed the thesis that school curricula and evaluation of those curricula contribute to the progressive alienation of Black children. Who controls the schools may be more important in the long run than the validity of the learning model upon which the curriculum is based. Benjamin Bloom's Mastery Learning Theory proposes that 90 percent of all learners can master the typical curriculum at a high level of achievement. Pupils will vary in the time they require to achieve mastery but whether they learn to master or not depends upon (a) whether they are prepared to spend the required time and energy they need to devote to the task, and (b) whether they are allowed to do so. The former is related to motivation, the latter depends upon the structural organization of the class and school (Bloom, 1974). If schools were to become as effective as proponents of mastery learning believe they can, how would American society react to a flood of competent and mobility-conscious job seekers? Spady (1974) concludes that the real question to be asked of mastery learning may not be whether it can successfully produce a generation of competent and literate young

people, but whether society, with its current economic structures, value orientations, and social arrangements, could actually tolerate them. Levin (1974) contends that schools will continue to show unequal results as long as there exist large inequities in the production, occupational, and earnings hierarchy. Thus, the ills of the schools reflect the chronic sickness of the larger society. It would be unrealistic to expect curriculum reforms or other reforms in educational practice to have a major impact on educational outcomes unless there are major changes in other social institutions which result in changes in the power positions of competing groups.

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